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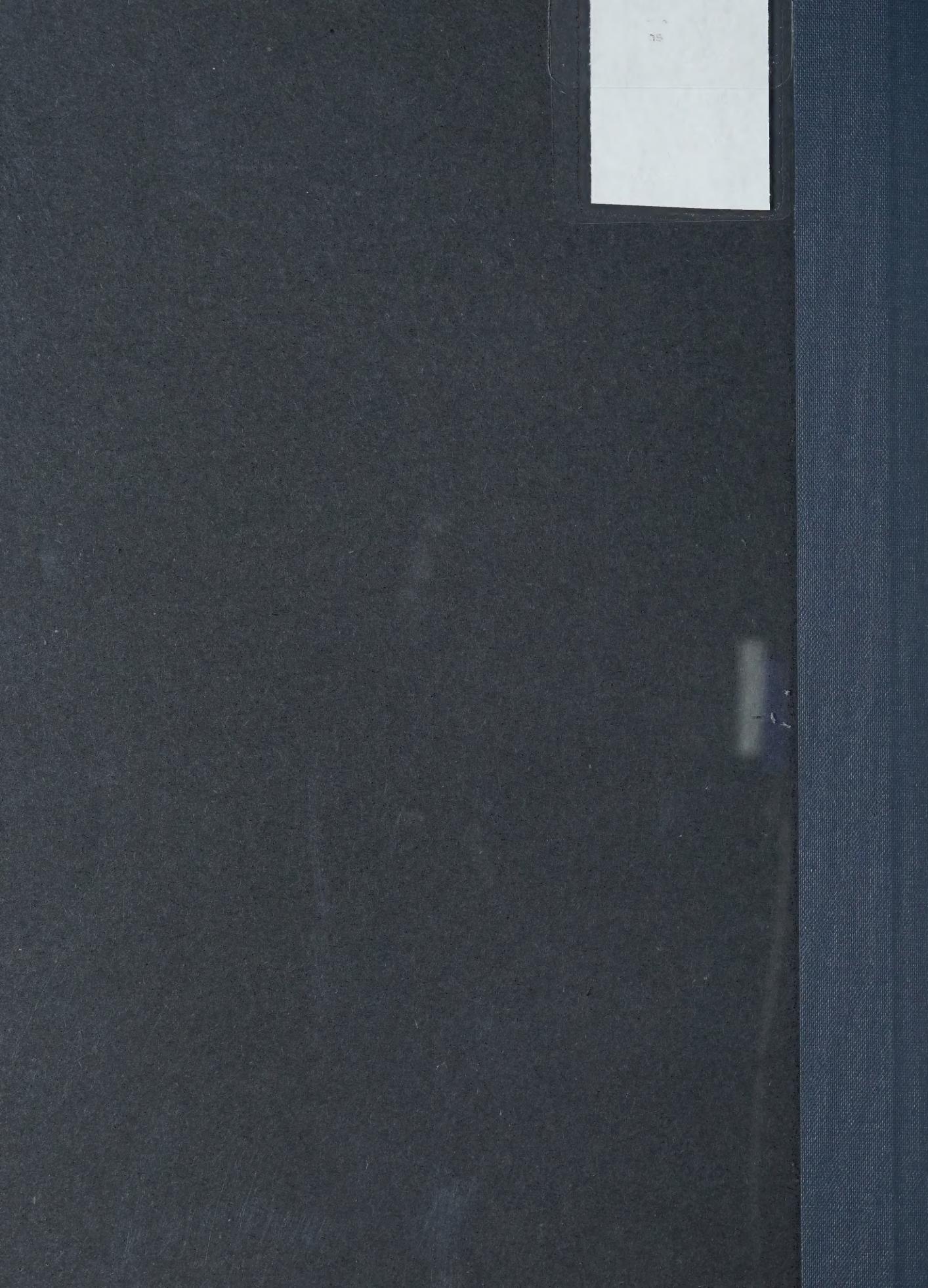
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No. 2



WOMEN AND FOOD PRODUCTION

OCTOBER 1985





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The Present Situation

According to UN estimates, women produce 50 per cent of the world's food (1). In Asia and Africa, women perform 60 per cent to 80 per cent of the total agricultural labour (2), and in Latin America, 40 per cent (3). All over the Third World, women actively engage in agriculture-related activities, such as planting, harvesting, weeding and fertilizing. Women predominate in the food processing and marketing process. They also feed and care for livestock and cows. Yet, official statistics have often under-represented women's contribution to agriculture by concentrating on wage labour or cash crop production, in which men play a major role.

The shift from subsistence agriculture to export-oriented cash-cropping has often had negative consequences for female agricultural workers. In many countries, agrarian reforms were implemented with the primary objective of creating large enough fields to make cash crops worthwhile. Most of these reforms unconsciously overlooked the traditional land usage rights women enjoyed by virtue of their roles as subsistence producers. As a result, women often were displaced onto more distant, less fertile land or reduced to being landless labourers.

Women who join the cash crop sector and earn wages often meet with discriminatory hiring practices and a large male/female wage gap. For example, women in Mexico who work on commercial crops are paid substantially less than men (4). As a result, many women work longer hours for very little revenue, and they lose their family's stable and inexpensive food supply from their previous subsistence lots.

Mechanization in rural areas has had similar effects. In Uganda and Kenya, for example, the widespread use of insecticides and fungicides has displaced women who formerly did 85 per cent of all the weeding by hand (5). And in Java, 1.2 million women were displaced with the introduction of rice mills (6). Mechanization and the introduction of the cash crop economy can also lower the status of women, through unequal distribution of cash revenues.

Introduction of new technology and cash crops have also been linked to inferior nutritional levels, despite the irony of higher cash incomes. Women often have to go further distances and till less fertile soils for the production of food for family use. With the increased workload, they will opt for less difficult, and sometimes less nutritious crops. Work overload and less nutritious food coupled with frequent pregnancies and child rearing has deteriorating affects on women's health. It also lowers women's agricultural productivity. Given the number of female-headed households and the dependency of most rural societies on women for food production and marketing, these factors may have dire consequences for future populations.

Past Achievements

Much research has been devoted in recent years to documenting the importance of women's work in food production. The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development held in Rome in 1979 recognized women's vital role both in agricultural and non-agricultural activities. The Conference also confirmed that the recognition of women's role was a prerequisite for successful rural development policies. The Copenhagen Program of Action of 1980 for the second half of the United Nations Decade for Women adopted specific measures to improve the situation of women in food production and agriculture. The Lagos Plan of Action adopted by the African Heads of State in 1980 stressed that women play a vital role in the solution to the African food crisis.

Growing recognition of women's roles and contributions to global food production has helped governmental and private aid agencies to ensure that newly introduced technology actually reaches and benefits women and their families. More researchers are now directly talking with rural women to listen to their concerns and take note of their suggestions. Women's ideas about solutions to local problems have often led to the establishment of agricultural extension training programs specifically directed at women farmers.

Barriers to Facilitating Women's Contribution to Food Production

In order to meet debt payments and to earn foreign exchange, many developing countries turn over a large amount of their land to cash crops for export --- usually directed at the urban markets or profitable markets in developed countries. Often, this increases the number of tasks for which women are responsible. For example, in Cameroon, one of the results of changing over to commercial rice production was that women were assigned the tasks of transplanting and harvesting the rice, in addition to their traditional full time workload in the cultivation of sorghum for their families.

There are a number of institutional and systemic barriers excluding women from decision-making, both at the national and local levels. It also has been difficult to recruit women as extension agents or include them otherwise in the agricultural training process. Few countries have made the special efforts needed to overcome the institutional and systemic barriers preventing women from participating fully in development.

Women's declining control over land often excludes them from receiving credit to purchase inputs required to raise new and better crops. Lack of credit locks women into outmoded, inefficient agricultural practices. In some cases, women's important roles and responsibilities in food storage, processing and marketing has not received sufficient attention. This can lead to substantial losses of post-harvest food. Conservative estimates show that over 30 per cent of all food grown annually in developing countries is lost to insects, rot and vermin. Most observers agree that if technology were applied to the storage, processing and preservation of various foodstuffs, losses could be reduced by 50 per

cent. This would automatically increase the amount of food on the world market by 10 per cent(8).

Future Action

- * Training programs in agricultural production methods and agricultural technology must be designed, taking into account women's schedules and special responsibilities.
- * The current trend of excluding women from agrarian reform programs and access to land, credit, technology and training must be reassessed within the present food crisis and the overall context of poverty in developing countries.
- * The existing potential of women in agriculture must be maximized in order to increase food production and to stop malnutrition. Women's roles in the food production, processing, storage and marketing cycle must be thoroughly analyzed, and measures must be taken to support women at every step.
- * New technology should not only be directed at the cash crop agricultural technology. Simple tools for alleviating the drudgery of women's work need to be developed and tested with consultation of local women.
- * Better storage methods that build on women's traditional skills could help prevent losses. Locally available materials could be used for pots, containers and bins.

Footnotes

1. Women, Environment and Food, 1980.
2. Women are Farmers Too, FAO World Food Day, News Release, February 1984.
3. Economic Commission of Latin America.
4. "Changing Economic Roles of Women on Two Mexican Communities", Kate Young, Proceedings, Fourth World Congress for Rural Sociology, Poland, August 1976.
5. Strategies for Small Farmer Development : An Empirical Study of Rural Development Projects, Vol. 1., Elliot R. Morse, US Agency for International Development, March 1978.
6. "Choice of Techniques in Rice Milling Java", Peter C. Timmer, Indonesian Economic Studies, Vol. 17, May - June 1984.
7. Post-harvest Food Losses in Developing Countries, National Academy of Sciences, 1978.



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